DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 108 463 FL 006 422

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TITLE Mexican-American Child Bilingualism: Double Deficit?
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingualism; Bilingual Students; *Child Language; Language Development; Language Standardization; Nonstandard Dialects; *Second Language Learning; *Spanish Speaking; *Standard Spoken Usage

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Mexican-American bilinguals are in danger of becoming victims of a double-deficit theory, i.e., they are erroneously considered by some to be deficient in both their languages. An article by Joseph H. Matluck and Betty J. Mace that takes the double-deficit viewpoint is refuted as being damaging to Mexican-American children. This position is defended by general remarks on standard usage, language change, interference, and first and second language acquisition; and by illustrating specific errors made in generalizing on the Mexican-American child's linguistic "deviations." (Author/AM)

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MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILD BILINGUALISM: DOUBLE DEFICIT?

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INTRODUCTION. In the United States, recent education of speakers of other dialects of English -- the problem was raised most dramatically by the Black movement -- has called into question many of our long-cherished, largely fanciful notions about standard dialect and its place in the educational process. Early efforts toward improving the education of Black and other "disadvantaged" children, notwithstanding the admittedly good intentions of workers in the field, were informed by the deficit theory (Bereiter and Engleman, 1966). The absence of copular forms in a dialect, for example, was taken as evidence of inability to form adequate, complete, logical thoughts or concepts. A later generation of investigators (chman, 1972) has begun to dispel the deficit myth insofar as Black English goes. In an article which burst like a bombshell on the academic world, James Sledd (1969) argued that the attempt to impose a standard dialect, with the monumental questions of adequate methods and personnel for the job and of the role of dialect as a vehicle for personality and group identification, was just another in a long series of time-wasting putdowns of Blacks.

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Why mention what ought to be well known by now to the readership of the Journal of School Psychology? Because Mexican-American bilinguals are in danger of becoming victims of a double deficit theory -- found guilty of being deficient in both their languages. One of the early handbooks on bilingual education (Anderson and Boyer, 1970) gave wide circulation to the idea of bilingual double deficit, and unfortunately the idea has gained

ground. We were grieved to see in the pages of this journal an article by Joseph H. Matluck and Betty J. Mace, "Language Characteristics of Mexican-American Children: Implications for Assessment," 11:4 (1973), pp. 364-386, which, although it finally pays token lip service to the idea of respect for nonstandard dialects, nevertheless, in the bulk of its pages, implicitly accepts a deleterious double-deficit view and supports the acceptance through inaccurate remarks and apparent ignorance of a large body of widely accepted findings in, to mention only these, the areas of bilingualism, second-language learning, and child language. Many of the objectionable remarks are from the work of others, but for what they cite without refutation M and M must themselves accept responsibility.

The present authors come from differing language, social, and educational backgrounds. We are only too painfully aware that linguistic science is still an infant science, if compared to physics or biology; thus, we acknowledge that much useful information is lacking at the moment and that it is possible for reasonable people to disagree, as we do on occasion with each other. However, it is our view that the Matluck-Mace article is potentially so damaging to Mexican-American children that it must be refuted, and moreover that no educational conclusions drawn from it can be deemed soundly based.

We support our conclusions on the M-M article first by general remarks on language change, interference, first and second language acquisition, etc., and then by illustrations of specific errors to make clear the dangers of generalizing on "the Mexican-American child" and his language "deviations."

UNQUESTIONED ACCEPTANCE OF PRESCRIPTIVIST ATTITUDES. If anything should be clear by now, it is that dialects, both geographic and social, can have autonomous linguistic development. That is, the term <u>standard</u> applied to

a dialect has more a social than a linguistic reference. A standard dialect is one which has acquired the high prestige of its speakers; it is not the source of other dialects; it is not a standard by which other dialects are to be judged, in the sense of the measuring instruments stored by the United States Bureau of Standards. Yet M and M unhesitatingly qualify both the English and Spanish of these children as deviation (which means "a turning away, a straying from"): ". . . and [the child's] deviations [emphasis supplied] from what for his dialect area might be considered the educated standard stem from approximately six sources . . . ." (p. 366) "As with his Spanish, the child's deviations [emphasis supplied] from some 'standard' variety of native American English are five- or six-fold." (p. 373) The effect of education or language assessment based on a view of the child's English and Spanish as "deviations" can only be punishment on two fronts. Mexican-American children have long suffered for their English; are we now to institutionalize punishment for their Spanish?

LANGUAGE CHANGE. One of the means by which change comes about in language is borrowing (Lehmann, 1972), which is, to be sure, more frequent in lexicon than in syntax. At a period when the English language was in close contact with French, there was extensive borrowing of vocabulary items, which were adjusted to fit the rules of English phonology. As a result, one can scarcely speak English without using words borrowed from French -- as well as from other languages, let it be noted. What are the (unstated!) standards by which M and M freely use borrowed words in their English but can qualify as interference borrowings from English into a dialect of Spanish?

STUDIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING. There is a growing body of evidence which seriously calls into question the theory -- for it was never more than that -- of interference; an important contribution is the work of Jack

Richards (1971). Additionally, in May 1973, Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt reported to the National TESOL Convention on a study of a second language acquisition in children which showed that only 4.7 percent of their mistakes were attributable in any way to interference. As long as one confines studies of language interference to a single group acquiring another language, one can perhaps maintain the illusion that interference is everywhere at work. However, if studies are broadened to include learners of other languages (the relevance of L2 first-language acquisition is discussed below), one quickly sees that there is the same "noncorrespondence in the use of articles" (p. 374), here qualified as unmistakable grammatical influence from Spanish, in the English of those whose first languages are Japanese, Amharic, Hindi, Polish, and Igbo as in that of some Mexican-American children.

PERCEPTION VS. PRODUCTION. It is certainly an interesting question what a given Mexican-American child perceives from the stream of English speech. The question, however, is empirical, to be answered by research rather than by reasoning. In this case, moreover, one must not reason from production to perception, but right the other way round, since child language studies tend increasingly to show that perception precedes production. M and M err also in assigning far too great a role to minimal-pair differences in word pairs, for the functional load of minimal-pair differences in English is quite small. It is this that has enabled speakers of English to operate successfully with a number of homonyms without more than an occasional communicative mixup.

It must additionally be emphasized that except in a badly run classroom and in works on linguistics, sentences do not occur in a vacuum. They occur in some specific context in which it is clear whether one is talking about

watching a cart or washing a car. Frequency plays a role too; how many of us have watched carts lately? This is only to repeat an obvious truth: language consists of several concurrently operating signal systems. It remains to be demonstrated that, if a Mexican-American child indeed fails to receive one or more of the signals, his communication is seriously hampered for this reason. In reference to the list of terminal clusters (page 376), we point out that final cluster simplification is a fact of the performance of many English speakers, particularly in informal settings. In fact, some Black dialects have no third-person singular present tense morpheme, yet this contrast with other dialects does not interfere with production or reception of messages (as opposed to phonemes). Perhaps the most grievous shortcoming of the article is in its consideration of isolated elements of language in isolation, without real consideration of social and psychological facts, i.e., the uses and users, to use M. A. K. Halliday (1968).

OVERGENERALIZATION. M and M have, it is apparent, fallen into a kind of equal and opposite error of overgeneralization. To counteract a historically early, general, nearly complete failure on the part of linguists and educators to consider the possibility of cultural differences between monolingual and bilingual speakers of English and their possible effects on language and schooling, M and M have now generalized far too broadly. Their article is replete with the use of "the Mexican-American child," which fails to take into account the differences which exist between a Mexican-American child from northern New Mexico or Colorado whose forbears arrived 200 years ago and a child who has recently arrived in the Lower Rio Grande Valley from Mexico. One must also remember that culture is an abstraction, sometimes an imperfect one, across thousands, even millions of people. Which monolingual speaker of English is a totally consistent bearer of his culture? Which Mexican-American?

By assigning enormous diversity to a single linguistic category, Mexican-American, M and M are able to make such statements as ". . . the Mexican-American child seems to enter school with control [!] of all of the English structures normally controlled by monolingual English speakers of the same age, although the degree of control is not the same." (p. 372) If one pairs this internally contradictory remark with the lists of Spanish interferences on page 374, one cannot with certainty say what the language behavior of "the Mexican-American child" could be. It is worth investigating whether these remarks mask the existence of distinct subgroups: those whose English is essentially similar to that of monolinguals comparable socio-economically; those who speak an as yet undescribed Mexican-American dialect (there may certainly be more than one); those who are in the process of acquiring English.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, DIALECTS. M and M nowhere define interference, but if the term is used with anything like its customary meaning, "mistake occasioned in L2 by the structure of L1," or "use of elements of one language when using another," then it is sometimes impossible to see what point they are trying to make. For instance, they qualify the phrases "of a father" and "of a boy" as "unmistakable grammatical influence from Spanish," but the phrases are perfectly ordinary English constructions. M and M use of + noun themselves: "of the Mexican-American child," (p. 372); "of Mexican-Americans," (p. 370); "the language of Mexican-Americans," (p. 365), etc. The word order category (page 374) does not make clear whether this is a question asking for confirmation of something heard previously, nor does it consider the question whether one is dealing with a dialect of English in which this word order is rule governed.

CHILD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF MONOLINGUALS. Some of those infamous "unmistakable grammatical influences from Spanish" are syntactic and morphological features which are also found in records of the language acquisition of monolingual speakers of English. For example, third-person singular pronouns. The now-renowned Eve said of her mother, "He a girl." (Cazden, 1972). And more: the non-inverted word order in question is found in the speech of monolingual infants. The do/don't pattern errors, "unmistakable interference from Spanish" in a Mexican-American child, are developmental in monolingual speakers of English. The literature on English child language is by now too vast to permit easy citation, but Brown (1973) and Bar-Adon and Leopold (1973) between them cite every important previous study in their exceptionally good bibliographies.

QUESTIONABLE CONCLUSIONS ON INTERFERENCE FROM ENGLISH. Our previous general remarks apply to the M-M statements on English-based interference in the Spanish of Mexican-American children, and the study of Spanish in America makes clear the problems which surround specific "hunting expeditions" for interference, most notably the search by Rodolfo Lenz (1892, 1893, 1904) for substratum influences in Chilean Spanish. Since the massive refutation of his studies by Wagner (1921, 1949), Alonso (1939), and the supporting opinions of Malmberg (1947-48) and Lapesa (1950), it has been clear that such searches are dangerous and misleading, often bringing the researcher to conclusions which are totally untenable. Concerning lexical interference, most researchers are cautious about labeling an item indigenismo lest it later be found to have a peninsular origin (Corominas, 1944). The same caution must be exercised in examining Mexican-American Spanish for traces of English interference, in addition to the previous generalized warning about automatic labeling of borrowing as interference.

The two M-M measures suggested in the discussion of syntactical interference, (1) items which do not correspond to usage in other Hispanic areas, and (2) items which coincide exactly with English structure, are naive, if not altogether useless. Usage in other Hispanic areas, past and present, is difficult to establish. Errors, such as that of labeling pachuquismo the word cacho (Coltharp, 1965), traced back to Latin (Corominas, 1954), stem precisely from establishing such measures of usage based on specific works.

The dangers of the second measure are made clear by Pérez Salas (1973), who traces such "English-sounding" items as le estamos incluyendo and en la escuela hay funcionando to normal Spanish usage -- both peninsular and American, within Kany's American Spanish Syntax (1954) as well as in classic literary works.

Phonological interference is no less difficult to establish irrefutably. The M-M statement, for example, on English influence in the weakening of invervocalic /y/ is untenable when one considers that the same weakening has been found by Alonso Garrote (1947) in the province of León and by Canfield (1962) in ten Latin-American countries. In the same way, statements concerning English interference manifested by the sporadic use of the labiodental [v] allophone of the /b/ phoneme are difficult to sustain in the face of the complexity of the history of these two sounds in the Spanish language (see Alonzo, 1967): the Academy's censure of the confusion of b and v in 1815 (Navarro Tomas, 1921); the resulting affectation resulting from the censure; and finally the unquestioned presence of the [v] allophone in the speech of those influenced by orthography (Navarro Tomas, 1971). Sweeping generalizations on b and v are thus to be avoided on the basis of evidence from Spanish linguistics.

CODE-SWITCHING AS INTERFERENCE. It is highly debatable, and certainly misleading, to speak of code-switching as interference. Haugen (1968), for example, maintains that bilinguals may even avoid interference by switching languages. Be that as it may, M and M make two statements on code switching which must be specifically refuted. "While it is no problem within the dialect, it does become one when communicating with monolingual speakers of either language or with speakers of other Spanish dialects." (p. 370). This remark is misleading in the light of the fact that it has already been established that code-switching (as well as interference) is counteracted by the social control of speech mixture (Weinrich, 1953). In this case, the English-speaking group expects to be (and is) addressed in its own language in all cases of intergroup communication. Codes alternate, as Gumperz (1969) has found, only when all participants are bilingual Mexican-Americans. Research in this area is particularly difficult since, as Craddock (1973) has found, the appearance of an outsider in the conversation will immediately cause the deletion of this alternating use. It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that a monolingual speaker of either language (but especially English) would be addressed in such a "merged" code.

The second remark, "The switching would then not occur unless the speaker were unable to come up with the appropriate concept in the one language" (p. 370) has been disproved by the work of Gumperz (1969, 1970, 1972) and that of Nils Hasselmo (1961, 1966, 1970). Indeed it is evident that rather than being caused by "lack of appropriate concepts in the one language," switches carry specific meanings. In the case of situational code-switching, participants signal changes in each other's rights and obligations by changing codes; and in the case of metaphorical code-switching meanings are generated which are similar to those conveyed by the choice of tú or usted.

SPANISH LANGUAGE. M and M list eleven vowel sounds and claim that of these "none exist in Spanish." Suffice it to say that the distinction [ey] -[e] exists commonly in Spanish: peina-pena, ley-le; it therefore does not have to be learned by the native speaker of Spanish, who will have no difficulty in the differentiation of such pairs as bait-bet. It is moreover a well-known fact that the lower allophone of Spanish /e/ coincides with English /e/ (Stockwell and Bowen, 1965). The sound /ow/ is much used in Spanish in such combinations as bou, lo usa, no hubo, etc. The M-M statement, then, is quite misleading. "The Spanish verb is normally used without a subject pronoun except under emphasis so the he/she/it contrast has to be learned." (p. 374) This is another example of a logically possible but incorrect statement, since there is no evidence that the use mentioned can be so attributed.

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